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CHAPTER II

INFANCY

843 Among the Lesu people an impending birth is a matter of communal concern. The news that a woman is pregnant spreads rapidly, and is almost immediately celebrated with a special ceremony. When Lagina failed to menstruate for a month some women came to her hamlet (Onel) expecting to hold pregnancy rites. But they decided to postpone them for a month just to make sure that she really was pregnant. And so at the end of two months, when everyone was quite certain that Lagina was going to have a child, the appropriate ritual was held.

843 616 Lagina is a member of the Hawk moiety. A group of Hawk women go to the house of Molung, who is of the Eagle moiety and a member of the Solema clan, which is the clan of the pregnant woman's husband. The Hawk women, faces smeared with white lime, advance joyfully and laughingly and push each other into Molung's house, pull the fire to pieces, throw the hot wood and stones through the doorway to the compound outside, and then hilariously dance around the place where the fire had been. This is the *Grimisi* dance. Lagina, the pregnant woman, is present, but takes no part in the proceedings, and stands aloof in the background. Molung, who sees her house being thrown into confusion, stands aside, smilingly. When the women have finished their dancing, Molung, assisted by her husband, gives each of the Hawk women a few uncooked taro and four or five coconuts. Then off they go, carrying the food in their baskets, to Brakko's house. She also is a member of the Solema clan and Eagle moiety. The same scene is enacted there. It is all done in a spirit of playful fighting—fighting because they come in and disrupt the fire, create

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disorder and confusion; but play in that it is all done laughingly, and the native term for it *muril* is literally translated "play fight." Brakko also gives the Hawk women coconuts, and now they return home. Both Molung and Brakko are assisted in the collection of the necessary taro and coconuts for this rite by women of the Solema clan.

But even though the rule is that it is the Hawk women who dance and engage in their more or less destructive gaiety when an Eagle woman is pregnant, or *vice versa*, this does not prevent the exception from happening. At the scene just described, Maerabit, a member of the Eagle moiety, joins in the dancing of the Hawk women. But its only significance, according to the natives, is that Maerabit always plays the clown and joins in any dancing or fun that may be going on. She is a grandmother and a woman past middle-age, but she is also a born jester, and is always amusing the crowd with her antics. The mere fact that her moiety would ordinarily bar her from participating in these hilarious rites will not stop her. Her grown-up daughters are ashamed of their mother's clownishness, and occasionally remonstrate with her, but Maerabit goes joyously on.

The playful fighting does not stop at the end of the one occasion just described, but is continued all during the pregnancy period, whenever the women of the village are assembled. Perhaps they are sitting on the ground chatting, after finishing their cooking, when suddenly a woman of the Hawk moiety jumps on the back of an Eagle woman, or pulls her loin-cloth, or jumps up and down on the outstretched legs of the woman as she sits on the sand. It is always done playfully and with much laughter both on the part of the participants and of the onlookers. The mother of the pregnant woman, both real and classificatory, is the particular victim of the women of the opposite moiety. But frequently the clowning becomes quite general, all the

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women present engaging in it. For a first pregnancy it is carried on more extensively than for a later one.

If it is the first one, the pregnant woman exchanges part of a baked taro with a woman who has had children successfully. The latter will eat half of a baked taro and give the remaining half to the expectant mother, who will return the gift with another half of a taro. It is believed that this exchange of taro will help the woman to deliver her child successfully. On the whole, she eats perhaps a little less than she did before. She thinks that if she eats too much the embryo will "fight" in her stomach. Certain fish containing many bones are taboo for either the pregnant woman or her husband to eat. This, however, is not strictly a pregnancy taboo, as it holds during the whole time of possible child-bearing, and applies to both the mother and her husband. It is believed that if the fish is eaten by either one, the future children will be hurt. When the child-bearing period is past the fish can be eaten. During childhood it is taboo to the female child, but not to the male.[1]

The woman who is pregnant goes about her daily work much as usual, and there is no custom of stopping work before the expected birth, However, exceptions are made in special cases. When one woman who had had several children born dead was again pregnant, she did not work quite as hard as usual after the fifth or sixth month. In her garden

[1] My discovery of the fish taboo came about in this way. A man from a bush village, but now living on the coast, presented me with a fish he had caught in return for a slight service I had rendered in giving some medicine to his sick child. Various women were present when the fish was given me, and immediately there was a great uproar—scolding of the man, much loud and angry talk, and the fish was taken away from me. It was not until they had quieted down somewhat that I could get at the cause for this sudden anger. It was explained that if I had eaten this fish I would never have healthy children, or perhaps they would be born dead. The man who had wanted to give me the noxious fish was called "an ignorant fool from the bush," after the women were convinced that he had no malicious intentions towards my "future children."

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work she was assisted by her daughter, her mother's sister, and the latter's daughter. Her husband also helped her a little more than usual. Both were very anxious, after all the past mishaps, that the coming child should live.

During this period the pregnant woman has no sexual intercourse, either with her husband or anyone else. Her husband, however, is permitted to have sexual relations with other women. Other pregnancy taboos affect the husband and not the wife. No man with a pregnant wife can fish or hunt wild pig. If he does, it is thought that he will have no success. Merely accepting food from any pregnant woman is considered inimical to fishing. In the magic connected with shark-fishing there is a spell designed to rid the man of the evil effects of having eaten with such a woman. One day a man, Tukan, returned from an unsuccessful hunt for wild pig, and he blamed his failure on the fact that there were so many women in the beginning of their pregnancy in the village. He said that they had eaten pig, and that this had weakened the dog's powers—how, he could not explain. Tukan made a magical spell over his dog to counteract this bad effect, and was confident that the next time he would have better luck when he went pig-hunting.

When the woman feels that the child is due she bathes in the sea to cleanse herself. The husband leaves the house and goes to sleep in the men's house, and she goes to her mother's house. Occasionally her mother will come to her house. If the mother is dead, the mother's sister (whose kinship term is mother) takes her place. A few women of the hamlet, usually kin to the pregnant woman and who have had children, assist, and sometimes one woman more skilled than the others takes the lead in helping deliver the child.

The parturient woman sits on the ground. Another woman sits at her back and supports her by clasping her waist with

3: Chinnery G, E-5 (1929) 1931 OM10 New Ireland OM10

The record depends entirely on the information given me by mothers who named their children in the order in which they were born, and then described those who died by saying "died while still breast-feeding", or "died after having finished with breast-feeding". Others standing by refreshed the memory of a mother as to names of children and approximate age at death when she appeared uncertain. Relatively few mothers had to be assisted in this way, but in one or two villages the information is not to be relied upon.

On looking down this column one finds that deaths during lactation are more numerous in some villages than in others, e.g., seven villages on the lower road between Kandan and Karu average 33 per cent. of issue dying during lactation. It is in this vicinity that the high central range runs close to the coast, its slopes falling abruptly down to the water's edge where the villages are built usually on coral cliffs. The cold mountain winds and rains sweep through them day and night, producing a climatic condition of sudden changes from heat to cold, which must be exceedingly dangerous for people who live there practically in nakedness. The garden lands are scattered all over the place, mostly on the steep mountain sides, and garden work is probably more strenuous than it is in the districts nearer to Kavieng, especially for pregnant women, or women nursing children that have to be carried about by their mothers when working in their gardens or looking for shell fish in the sea. I saw infants being fed on solid foods, and it was quite a common thing to meet pregnant women or women with babies trudging up and down the mountain sides on their way to and from the gardens, with enormous bags of food, and infants sitting on top of the bags. On discussing with the men the question of women resting while pregnant, I was told that the women insist on doing their share of the work at this period for fear of being shamed by other women, especially the older ones, who laugh at them if they become more careful with pregnancy and talk in a superior way of what women did and endured in olden times. At the same time, my informant pointed out, a husband steps in and relieves his wife as much as possible of heavy work during the period of gestation and lactation. I was also told that men try to keep their wives out of the water during these periods by doing more shell-fishing themselves. This may be so in a few individual cases, but I am inclined to think that most of the women have to bear their burden alone, and, as the conditions of life are rather too strenuous at this end of the road for child-bearing women, the health of both the mother and the child suffers, with disastrous results to the child. This, to my mind, accounts for the low issue rate and heavy infant mortality rate in this group of villages. Being situated where they are, far from any plantation and over 100 miles from the Medical Officer at Kavieng, places them out of reach of the present medical service, which is not able to cope

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surreptitously. Divorce is moderately common and individuals may have a succession of mates.

During the period of pregnancy a women may have no sexual intercourse with her husband or anyone else. The man may, however, have sexual intercourse with a woman other than his wife. After the birth of the infant neither the mother nor her husband may have intercourse with each other, or with anyone else, during the period of lactation. For the women there is thus an abstention from sexual intercourse for a minimum of three years and for perhaps as much as four. This taboo, if kept, would cause a long interval of time between births. It is difficult to find out exactly how strictly it is kept. Like all taboos in primitive societies it is sometimes broken. But one cannot collect statistics on the subject because one only hears of the cases when the culprits are found out. After living in the society for almost a year, the writer is of the opinion that it is kept moderately strictly. There is a grave social stigma for those who break it and are found out, and their infant is supposed to become ill. One such case happened during the author's visit and was the cause of much gossip. It was known that the parents of a certain sickly infant had broken the taboo and the natives all pointed to their unhealthy infant as the result. It is more difficult to break this taboo and not be found out than it is for a member of our society to transgress our custom of monogamy and not be caught. In the primitive society under discussion there are several conditions which make secrecy difficult. First, the village is small, numbering only a couple of hundred, and everyone knows everyone else well. Secondly, practically all of the social life is carried on outdoors, and extra-marital intercourse generally takes place in the bush, which limits somewhat the privacy. Thirdly, these people, like all others, love to gossip and indulge in it to a great extent. It is therefore not easy to conceal a violation of this taboo. The social disgrace of being detected, and the belief that it will harm the child, are strong deterrents in a society motivated largely by social prestige.

There is no infanticide and, as far as I know, no physical means of abortion. There is, however, a leaf, or rather several leaves, chewed by the women and believed to cause sterility. There is another leaf which if chewed within two months after conception will make the embryo disappear, according to native belief. Specimens of both kinds

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stones, and when these are hot they are leveled and the food put between them. Leaves and sand are then put over it, and the food remains there until it is baked. Men are working in groups of two or three, but not very continuously, wrapping a fish or a pig in leaves preparatory to baking, or bringing in leaves from the bush to wrap around the food. Their work in this connection is never as steady as the women's work. A man may tend to the liga and then loll around for a half hour or more, until there is something else to do. Frequently the men will take care of the babies, while the mothers scrape the taro. The main work of cooking falls upon the women; although the men do assist, this does not break into the sexual division of labor.

When the women have finished preparing the taro (for a big feast this takes at least three or four hours), and after it has been placed in the liga, the ground on which they have been working is cleaned and they take their ease. Until now they have been working seriously and without stopping, except perhaps to nurse a baby. There has been no talking except for the necessary remarks about the taro. Now they sit in the same place smoking their pipes and chatting. Gossip is exchanged, jokes are told and followed with appreciative laughter, and here and there a woman is engaged in the pastime of searching for lice in a friend's or relative's hair. If a woman of the village has just become pregnant, there will be playful fighting between the women of the opposite moieties. This part of the pregnancy rites occurs whenever there is a group of women present. The men in the meantime are a short distance away, on the beach, in the compound in front of the men's house or some other house, in groups of two or three, smoking and chatting but not in any large group. This period—while the food is baking in the liga—is an easy, convivial, feminine communal occasion, as is the eating which follows for the men.

Description of Feast

Three or four hours later, when the food has been baked, the men and boys carry it in their hands into the cemetery. For the men the cemetery serves as a banqueting hall and most of the men's ritual feasts are held there.[11] Women are never permitted in the cemetery for a feast, or at any other time, except at a burial, and then they leave immediately after the interment.[12]

[11] The economic feasts in payment to workers are not always held in the cemetery, and the malanggon ones are held in a special structure erected for them. The connection of eating in the cemetery with mortuary beliefs must be considered at another time.

[12] However, I was invited to all the feasts, and the invitations were always accepted.

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Other Customs centering about Food

264 There are various interesting customs which center around food apart from feasts or family meals. These may just be mentioned here as showing the important sociological rôle of food. Betrothal is consummated by the [584] girl preparing some food for the man and their sitting down with the basket of food between them and eating together. In many folk-tales, when we are told that a man and a woman, or a man and two women, sit down and eat together, this expresses the fact that they are married. A woman never eats with her lover.

[754] The remains of food are connected with black magic; and so one is careful never to leave any left-overs about.

[769] Even the ghosts are concerned with food. After a successful fishing expedition a half taro and a small piece of fish is left on the liga for the ghosts of dead clan ancestors whose aid has been asked in fishing magic.

262 The prohibition of certain foods on particular occasions is the essential part of several taboos. The most important of these is the taboo against eating taro for certain relatives of a dead person over a prescribed period of mourning. During pregnancy a woman may not eat a certain fish. This is [843] one with many bones, and it is thought that they would hurt the embryo child. A pregnant woman will be given a half of a baked taro by a woman who has had children. The latter eats the other half, and this act is believed to insure a successful delivery of the infant.

262 431 574 Food is the most frequent form of gift between husband and wife, between mother's brother and his nephew or niece, between brother and sister, and between friends. It is also an invariable mark of hospitality to offer food to a stranger.

Social Function

182 264 574 From the preceding description it is obvious that feasts in this society have other functions beside the satisfaction of physical hunger. Sometimes there is more than one feast in a day and the men then eat as a duty rather than because they are hungry. One day there were three feasts in near-by hamlets, and all attended by the same men. Two were connected with death rites, and one was to mark the occasion of an infant's cutting his first tooth. By the time the third feast was reached, the men were not hungry, but all ate.

Even the family meal, which has the very definite physiological function of satisfying hunger, has also the sociological rôle of uniting the various members. In a similar way the sentiments binding the society together are given collective expression at the feasts, although the very strong line of sex